

Islam in the Bosnia and Herzegovina (A Comparative Analysis of Theories about the Spread of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina)

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper is to overview different theories regarding the origin and spread of Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosniaks happen to be the most Western indigenous Muslim nation, besides the fact that, they also are the most Eastern of all European Muslims. Bosniaks are the only people in contemporary Europe who are threatened to be eradicated as a people and nation. The coming of Islam to Eastern Europe is the most important turning point in the history of Bosniaks. Bosnia is witness to the phenomenon of the spread of different religions because it did not predominantly choose either Islamization or Christianization. Sufism added a great deal to the spread of Islam in Bosnia. In Bosnia the Sufism can be traced back to the seventh century. Sufis came to Bosnia and to its Bogomil people from the East, and the Franciscans from the West. The individual religious and national communities in Bosnia Herzegovina developed in close association and interaction with each other.

Bosnia is located in the western Balkans, bordering Croatia (932 km) to the north and south-west, Serbia (302 km) to the east, and Montenegro (225 km) to the southeast. It lies between 42° to 46° North latitudes, and 15° to 20° E longitudes. The human settlement in Bosnia and Herzegovina is traced back to the Neolithic age, during and after which it was populated by several Indo-European and Celtic civilizations.¹ The country is mostly mountainous, surrounding the central Dinaric Alps. The Alps get higher towards the south run in east-west direction. The highest peak is Maglic 2,386 m, at the Montenegrin border. The country has only 20 kilometers of coastline.²

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Culturally, politically, and socially, the country has one of the richest histories in the region. Bosnia occupies the northern areas which are roughly four-fifths of the entire country, while Herzegovina occupies the rest in the south part of the country. According to the UN Development Program's Human Development Report 2005, Muslims constitute 40 percent of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Other religious groups with which Islam coexists in Bosnia are the Serbian Orthodox Church 31 percent, Roman Catholic Church 15 percent, Protestants 4 percent, and other groups 10 percent³.

Islam in Bosnia Herzegovina

The oldest traces of mankind in Bosnia and Herzegovina were found during the Paleolithic period near Doboj, Prnjavor and in the Usora Valley. During the Neolithic period there were three cultural zones: the Adriatic in Herzegovina; the Pannonian-Balkan in Bosnia and the transitional zone between the two in the headwaters of the river of Bosnia. Due to a variety of factors (such as frequent boundary shifts and a relative isolation from the rest of Europe) no detailed population statistics are available during the middle Ages. It is generally estimated that the population of the Kingdom of Bosnia at the height of its power was between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people with few urban centers⁴. The important urban centers were the cities of Jajce, Srebrenica, and Visoko. Majority of the population was living in rural areas- and the social organization of Medieval Bosnia developed into what was called *Zadruga*. In this system, communities were organized by a few families of common interests usually situated in a cluster housing formation. Leaders of the community were selected according to their age and high ethical standards. *Zadruga* was primarily an agrarian community greatly dependent on natural resources.

There are generally three different theories on the spread of Islam in the Balkans. The first one suggests that the Ottoman conquest was followed by genocide over the indigenous populations and, thereafter, by an intensive colonization by Turks from Anatolia⁵. Another thesis - supported by a number of nationalist Balkan writers- suggests that Islam had spread in the region in a coercive way. This thesis puts a lot of emphasis on the forceful recruitment of Christian boys (*devshirme*) to

participate in the Ottoman *janissary* institution (14th-18th c.)⁶. Yet a third thesis suggests that conversion took place only on a voluntary principle, because non-Muslim subjects had economic incentives to do so. By adopting the new religion, they eliminated several restrictions discussed below⁷. This thesis is supported by a substantial number of western scholars.

Different theories about emergence of Islam in the Bosnia Herzegovina:

Various theories have been put forward to explain the emergence of Islam in the Bosnia Herzegovina. Some noticeable are: (i) Gradual spread of Islam, (ii) Theory of mass conversion to Islam, (iii) Change of religion in order to maintain the feudal status, (iv) Embracing Islam due to law of *devsirme*, (v) Conversion to Islam under pressure of the state and (vi) Conversion of religion due to socio-economic factors.

(i) Gradual spread of Islam:

According to recent research, Ottoman ruler, Sultan Muhammad Thani conquered this region in 1463. After his conquest, Islam slowly started spreading in this region due to teaching of various preachers. Valuable information about that era is collected from tax records of the Ottoman period. These records were very carefully maintained and it listed people according to their properties and religion. These records gave a very detailed picture of the spread of Islam in the Bosnia Herzegovina over period of time.⁸

These tax records show that soon after conquest of the region by Turk rulers (1468-69) Islam was introduced in the region of the Bosnia. These earlier records are available for major cities of Bosnia. These confirms that the Christian population was around 25000, while Muslim were just around 4500. Next record available is for 1485 about Bosnian Sanjak⁹, which has revealed that there were 3552 Christian and 4134 Muslim households. Another record available for the year 1520 reveals that the Christian population of Bosnian Sanjak was 98095 in number, while Muslims accounted as many as 84657. There is no record of Muslims' migration towards Bosnia in 1400 therefore this records estimates only the Bosnia native Muslim population who embraced Islam¹⁰.

In Herzegovina spread of Islam was faster as compared to Bosnia. In 1509 a protestant priest confessed that a huge population of Christians in this region embraced Islam willingly.¹¹ This particular event is also reported by various historians of whom historian D. Mandic is noteworthy. In North and North-east regions of Bosnia Islam spread very slowly. After the extension of the Ottoman empire into these areas, Islam started to spread with a faster pace. Historian Dominican Father Mandic states that between 1520 to 1524 rulers have forcibly converted Catholic Christians to Islam. But no authentic proof of such an event is available. Adam Handiz did a detail historic review of north east Bosnia, who can show no proof of forceful conversion of Christians to Islam. However it is conformed that Christians migrated from other regions to these areas. Adam Handiz further writes that there were 10 Catholic Churches, which were reduced to only 5. Eventually he suggests that it is possible that local Christians accepted Islam willingly¹².

The trend of embracing Islam was more common in urban localities than the rural ones. In 1533 only one third of Bosnia was Muslim while in 1548 forty percent (40%) of Bosnian population had joined Muslim faith. Up till that the tax record was well maintained but later these records were not properly upheld and hence the information is at best sketchy and poorly documented.

This whole process of spreading of Islam in this region covers 150 years. The data collected from tax records of Ottoman Period clearly shows that old concepts about the spread of Islam in Bosnia Herzegovina were not based on academic evidences. These records also show that during this period of Ottoman rule there were no settlements of the Turk Muslim here which were created in the Balkan and elsewhere. During Ottoman period some European travelers got confused that Bosnian Muslims call themselves Turks. This does not mean that they consider themselves Turks; in fact for Ottoman Turks they used title Osmanli or Turkus¹³. This may be possible that some traders, farmers and people of various walks of life came to this area and get settled here. Army personnel who came to these areas in earlier periods of conquest also returned to their native areas.

All this strongly proves that Islam did not spread by force. In fact this was very slow and gradual process which took several generations. However there is no concrete historic proof which would identify the exact time and period when and how change of religion took place. But as historians have suggested it was a willing change. Tax records also show that a section of population still carried on their pre-Islamic religious practices. It was also a common practice that after an individual converted to Islam he would continue to live with his Christian household. This is also proven by the family names of Bosnian Muslims for example, Farhad bin Ivan or Hassan bin Mihailo etc.¹⁴

(ii) Theory of Mass conversion to Islam

A popular theory about spread of Islam is mass conversion of Bosnian Christians. According to this theory natives of Bosnia belonged to Bogomil sect, which was a sect within the Christianity. Since 13th century Roman Catholic Christians were mistreating them, as the new sect was not considered fully Christian. Pope had ordered on many occasions to deal the new sect with force and revert them to old traditions. In 1325 Pope wrote letter to King of Bosnia to use force and erase this new sect.¹⁵ In response to this letter Bosnian King Stephen Katro Menak (1320-53) and his priests imposed brutal punishments on them killing many of the followers. In these hard days Bogomil Sect was constrained to the extent that they asked Turks to help them. Therefore, Sultan Muhammad Fateh in 1463 attacked Bosnia and made it part of his vast empire. Professor Arnold writes “From this time we hear but little of the Bogomils they seem to have willingly embraced Islam in large numbers immediately after Turks conquest, and the rest seem to have gradually followed later, while the Bosnian Roman Catholics emigrated into neighboring territories of Hungry and Austria”.¹⁶

This author further writes, “We may rather find the reason for the willingness of the Bogomils to allow themselves to be merged in general mass of the mousalman believers, in the numerous points of likeness between peculiar beliefs and tenets of Islam. They rejected the worship of Virgin Mary, the institution of baptism and every form of priesthood. They abominated the cross as a religious symbol, and

consider it idolatry to bow down before religious pictures and image and relics of the saints. Their houses of prayer were very simple and unadorned, in contrast to gaudily decorated Roman Catholic Churches and they shared the Muhammadon dislike of bells which they styled the devil's trumpets. They believed that Christ was not crucified but some phantom was substituted in his place, in this respect agreeing partially with teaching of Islam".¹⁷

Till 1st World War it was an accepted view that soon after Turks conquest Bogomil sect was converted to Islam. Its main reason was similarity between their beliefs with that of Islam and the harsh treatment of them by the Pope and Roman Catholic Christians. Some present day Yugoslavian historians such as Solvja have stated that this theory of mass conversion is true. During the 1st and 2nd world wars some Yugoslavian historians (Cubrilovic & Skaric) tried to prove it wrong. They viewed that Islam has spread gradually over the period of 150 years and this has also been shown in the tax records collected during the Ottoman period. But those people of society whose power is derived from the Church would have not easily or willingly converted to Islam¹⁸.

Situated on the dividing line between the areas of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox religious influence, Bosnia and Herzegovina suffered from constant internal turmoil from the 10th to the 15th centuries. This situation was complicated by the introduction from Bulgaria of an ascetic dissident Christian cult -Bogomilism -- during the 12th century many Bosnian nobles and a large portion of the peasantry persisted in the heresy despite repeated attempts by both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches to crush the cult. The chaos caused by this religious struggle laid the country open to the Ottoman Turks after they again defeated the Serbs in 1459. By 1463 the Turks controlled Bosnia and twenty years later gained control of Herzegovina; many Bogomil nobles and peasants accepted the Islamic religion of their conquerors.¹⁹

(iii) Change of religion in order to maintain the feudal Status

Another very important theory about spread of Islam in Bosnia Herzegovina is the change of religion in order to maintain the feudal

status. This theory was presented by Van Frango Jukic and was widely accepted during 19th century. This theory was widely accepted as well as rejected by a number of researchers. A research published in 1930 rejected this theory. According to this theory feudal lords converted to Islam were not good Christians. They only changed their religion in order to save their property under Muslim rule and avoid payment of taxes. Researchers are of the opinion that after the conquest of Turks the local feudal were forced to accept Islam in order to keep their existing status.

But on the contrary it is wrong to suggest that Bosnian feudal only changed religion in order to get benefits from state because soon after Turks conquest Muslim established a system in which all land owner regardless of religious affiliation had to pay certain amount to army. Famous Yugoslavian historian V. Cubrilovic, 1930, mentions many Bosnian land owners who took jobs with army and also kept their properties; they were not forced to convert to Islam. In Ottoman period it was a common practice to have Christians in the army. There were also associates to Turk households, for example in 1475 a famous Christian soldier Surgevlah Svinjarevic was chief to Sarajevo governor. The common thought that in Bosnia Herzegovina people converted to Islam just to avoid taxes which the Ottoman Empire had imposed on the non-Muslims is wrong. Financial benefit cannot be under estimated but during that period tax imposed was not much that it would lead to change of religion. For example for rich people it was four ducket (9 shilling), for middle class it was two ducket and for lower class it was one ducket. This amount was only levied when empire was at war with Austria and Venus. The Muslims also paid taxes and they also had to give tax apart from zakat which is important part of Islam while non-Muslim are exempted from it.

(iv) Embracing Islam due to law of *devsirme*

The Ottoman term *devsirme* or *devshirme* literally mean “Collecting” or “Collection”. The Balkan Christian historian refers the term as “blood tribute” or “boy levy”. The term was first used in the time of Sultan Murad I (1326-1389).²⁰ Law of *devshirme* was implemented in 1330 by Sultan Aur khan as sort of punishment for the Christians. According to

this law after every four years Sultan's army would visit those districts where this law was imposed, to recruit the Christian children between age six and nine. These children were sent to the Muslim scholars /schools to learn from them Islam and be raised according to Islamic traditions. After finishing education majority of these students would usually join Muslim army as Muslims.²¹

Due to law of *devshirme* large numbers of youngsters from Balkan were converted and they joined army and other administrative jobs. According to historian Astrin Slovene (1530) Ottoman Empire preferred to have Bosnians in army because as compared to other races they were trustworthy, strong and intelligent. Bosnian serving in army and other administrative jobs have spent time in different areas of Ottoman Empire. By law they are not allowed to get married during their services period. But later on they would come back to their native land, got married and were awarded lands. The law of *devshirme* was considered a tool for spread of Islam especially in the region of the Bosnia. This theory was supported by a number of nationalist Balkan writers.²² This theory suggests that Islam was spread in a coercive way.

(v) Conversion to Islam under pressure from state law

European historian claim that in Bosnia a major reason for spread of Islam was the good behaviour of local Muslim population. This is said because with the non-Muslims, the behavior of the State was different as the laws at that time were strict for them. According to the laws non-Muslims were not allowed to ride a horse neither to carry any sort of weapon nor would they dress up like Muslims. This law was only implemented in earlier days of the Turk conquest. Later historians of the 17th century report that Bosnian Christian priests and traders were allowed to wear same dress as Muslims. They used to ride and carry weapons too. Gradually the laws that prevented construction and repair of churches were also withdrawn by the Sultan. Nevertheless it is true that Muslims were given certain priority over the Christians. One such example is that Christians were not allowed to pursue any legal matter against Muslim neither were they allowed to testify in any court of law. This was very serious divide between the two which was strongly felt by all the Christian community all over Bosnia.

(vi) Conversion of religion due to Scio-economic factors

Two important socio-economic factors played decisive role in the spread of Islam in the region of Bosnia: slavery and development of the Muslim settlements which were common in Europe and Central Asia. When Turks conquered this region many Bosnian slaves got associated with the Turk household. They got close interaction with Muslims that is how they hastened to accept Islam. During Ottoman Empire Venus and Austria were conquered and many soldiers from there army and locals were taken to slavery. In 1494 seven thousand (7000) Croatians, 200000 from Hungry and 1500 from Slovenia were taken as slaves. When any of them accepted Islam they were freed, that is why Muslim population in Croatia, Hungry and Slovenia increased.²³

The beauty of the surrounding areas of the Bosnia main city is the personal efforts of the local people, they used to donate their land and properties to peoples welfare. One such example is Gazi Kiro Baig (1521) who was a Bosnian Sanjak. He spent funds on emerging mosques and religious schools. He also made libraries attached to the schools. This gave rise to Sufism. He reduced the tax burden on the locals which led to the high living standard of the locals. Sarajevo became center of Islamic activities and festivals. This disturbed the village life of the surrounding areas as more and more people rushed towards the cities. Increased Muslim activities here led to decrease in the Christian population.

Conclusion:

Sufism played an important role in spread of teachings of Islam in Bosnia. One such line of Sufism is *Naqshbandia*. It first established its center in 1463 and later another one in 1500. These and various other religious centers all over the Bosnia led the people to closely observe Islam. In regard to conversion to Islam in particular and to Ottoman rule in general, the Bosnian Serb Socialist, Von Pelagic wrote that: "The Turkish government was not imposing its language on the subdued peoples, as European countries did and still do. The Ottoman Empire is by far much more tolerant and humane towards other religions than many Christian governments and States. The people who got Turkified (embraced Islam) were not forced to do so by knife or

fire, but rather they did so voluntarily for the sake of their own interest. The democratic nature of the Muhammadan faith and government contributed to this greatly. The Serbian Nationalist Vaso Glusac does not believe pelagic idea. He believes that Bosnian fought for centuries for their state and church how it's possible that they abandoned their faith.²⁴

Serbian extremists refer Muslims as newcomer and immigrants as a justification for their policies of ethnic cleansing. There is no doubt that the economic and political success of the locally recruited Ottoman officials and the desire for economic prosperity of the Ottoman cities could have motivated conversion to Islam. Conversion to Islam has its own advantages and disadvantages, for men there was a possibility of being killed, injured or disabled during a campaigns of the Sultan. The Converts must have been aware of these facts. Similarly Muslims farmers were not exempt from all taxes though at lower rates compared to Christians.²⁵

There were all these factors working together which increased the population of Muslim all this took about 150 years.

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- ⁹ Sanjak were administrative divisions of the Ottoman Empire. This Turkish word means banner. In Serbo-Croatian language it is called sandzok which signify a military district, normally less than a province in size. Its governor used to be called Sanjak Beg. Sarajevo was the administrative capital of the sanjak of Bosnia, which was later on changed to Banjaluka and in 1939 shifted back to Sarajevo.
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- ¹² Noel Malcom. (1994). "Bosnia a short History". Macmillan Ltd. London. PP: 52-53.
- (Noel Malcom presented the figure from "Poreklo Muslimanskog Plemstva U Bosni I Hercegovini" PP:300 written by V. Cuvbrilovic.)
- ¹³ Because of Amir Usman Khan, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Turks used the title Osmanli, other nations also knew them by this title. Turkus is derived from Turk oskali which mean son of Turk.
- ¹⁴ Edward.S.Creasay. (1961). "History of Ottoman Turks". London PP 4.
- ¹⁵ Detail of Pope's letter to Bosnian king is given by Sir Thomas Arnold in his book "*The Preaching of Islam*" pp 98. It says "lo our beloved son and Nobel man Stephen, prince of Bosnia, knowing that tho art a faithful son of the church, we therefore charge thee to exterminate the heretics in thy dominion, and to render aid and assistance to Fobian, our inquisitor, for as much as a large multitude of heretics from many and divers parts collected hath followed together into the principality of Bosnia, trusting there to sow their obscene errors, and dwell there in safety. These men imbued with cunning of the old fianed, and armed with the venom of their falseness, corrupt the mind."
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